

Office of Health Equity

Veterans Health Administration

Department of Veterans Affairs



AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE VETERANS TELEHEALTH INFORMATION BRIEF

Lauren Korshak, DHealth(c), MS, ACSM-CEP, EIM, Office of Health Equity, Amanda Lienau, Ph.D., Director of Open Innovation VA-Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning, Ashley L. Bowman, MPA, MSHI, Office of Health Equity

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INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves a Veteran population that is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Equitable access to high-quality care for all Veterans is a major tenet of the VA healthcare mission. The Office of Health Equity (OHE) champions the elimination of health disparities and achieving health equity for all Veterans.

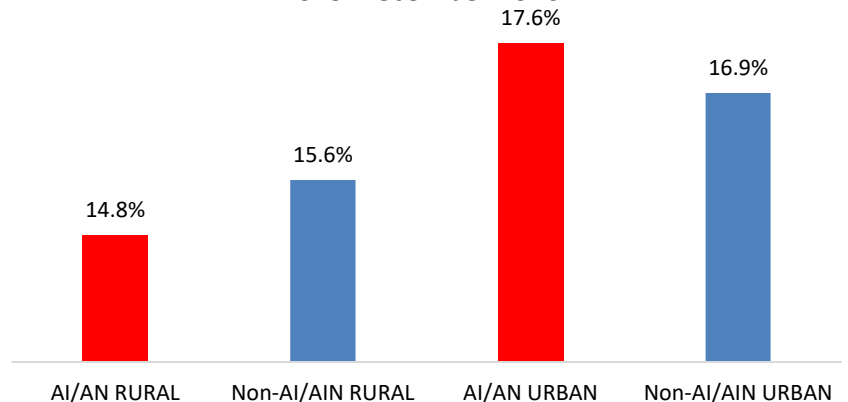
American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) serve in the U.S. Armed Services at a higher rate than any other group. Almost three-quarters (74.3%) of AI/AN Veterans who are service-connected utilize VA health care.

AI/AN Veterans are nearly 4 times more likely than non-AI/AN Veterans to live in highly rural areas. AI/AN Veterans experience more serious health issues, including reports of poorer quality of life and more physically unhealthy days, and are at a high risk for health inequities, including mental health care access than both AI/AN non-Veterans and Veterans of other races or ethnicities.

MENTAL HEALTH VIDEO TELEHEALTH USE AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE VETERANS

Roughly 33% of AI/AN Veterans using VA care access VA mental health services. In a national sample of Veterans who accessed VA mental health care between October 2019-December 2020, AI/AN Veteran groups were less likely to use video telehealth technology to receive mental health treatment than their non-American AI/AN counterparts. Additionally, AI/AN Veterans living in rural areas had fewer mental health telehealth encounters than their AI/AN V urban Veteran counterparts.

Percent of Telehealth Mental Health Visits in AI/AN and non-AI/AN Rural and Urban Veterans, October 2019-December 2020



From Kusters, I.S., et al., 2023.



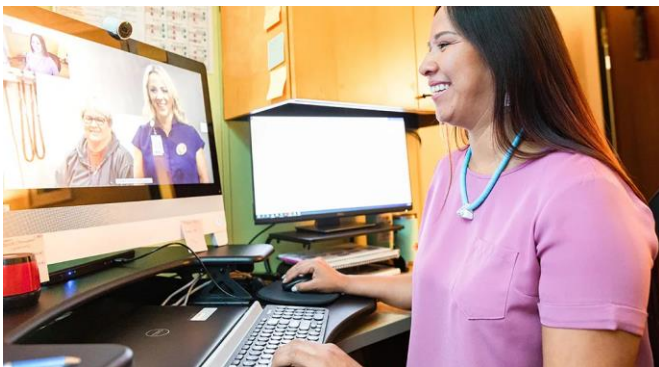
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CULTURALLY CENTERED IMPLEMENTATION OF VIDEO TELEHEALTH FOR RURAL NATIVE VETERANS

VA Telehealth technology enables Veterans to connect with their VHA care team from home in addition to their local clinic or hospital. Video telehealth can improve access to mental care for AI/AN Veterans by reducing barriers (e.g., cost, travel, time) and improving quality of care. To meet the unique needs of AI/AN Veterans, a model of culturally centered mental care that leverages telehealth technology while addressing the specific sociocultural, historical, and contextual factors of Native Veterans was developed through a collaboration between VHA's Office of Rural Health-Salt Lake City Rural Resource Center, and the Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health.

This telehealth implementation approach was developed as part of a quality improvement effort to expand utilization of video telehealth among AI/AN Veterans receiving care within VHA and was



implemented initially at four VA medical facilities. This approach, which aimed to meet the unique needs of AI/AN Veteran populations and communities, resulted in increased video telehealth utilization for mental health care among Rural AI/AN Veterans at all partner sites.

THE HERO'S STORY PROJECT

In addition to using telehealth technology to increase access to mental health treatment, VA is supporting innovative solutions that provide Veterans with mental health resources that meet Veterans where they are. [Mission Daybreak](#) is part of VA's 10-year strategy to end Veteran suicide through a comprehensive, public health approach; the challenge aims to create an ecosystem of support for innovators and solutions that can advance this goal. Televeda's The Hero's Story Project is developing the first mental health app and comprehensive operational plan for AI/AN populations. Televeda is designing the tool in partnership with AI/AN and Veteran communities for Navajo and Lakota Veterans with plans to adapt and expand for use with other tribes. The solution incorporates traditional healing practices like storytelling and talking-circle interventions to reduce Veteran suicide and improve access to VA resources.

For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit: <https://www.va.gov/healthequity/>

References

Day, S.C., Caloudas, A., Frosio, K., Lindsay, J.A., & Shore, J. (2023). Culturally centered implementation of video telehealth for rural Native veterans. *Telemedicine and eHealth*.

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